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ABSTRACT

While many factors contribute to success and/or failure in ABE (Adult Basic Education) and ASE (Adult Secondary Education) activities, ABE and ASE writers will succeed or fail in direct correlation to what is happening to their self-esteem in the context of writing instruction. The first guideline for teaching writing to adults is telling the truth about how hard and risky writing is. The second guideline is respecting the learner's integrity. Establishing the sort of climate most likely to both further the writing instruction and safeguard and enhance the self-esteem of ABE and ASE learners means creating a community of learning characterized by small-group, cooperative learning. ABE and ASE writing students must learn that writing is more process than it is event--the writing instructor must introduce them to prewriting, writing itself, and editing. The task of specifying topic, purpose, and audience will be very difficult for ABE and ASE learners. The writing journal is a teaching and learning device which is ideally suited to ABE and ASE writing instruction. Since ABE and ASE writing instruction is more a matter of process and practice than it is of new data to be acquired, the journal can even serve as a class-created text, as the primary if not exclusive means of ABE and ASE writing instruction. (Contains 20 references.) (RS)

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Guidelines for Teaching Writing to ABE and ASE Learners

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

From an instructional designer's or agency administrator's viewpoint, the only responsible way to talk about ABE and ASE writing instruction would be to give equal weight to socio-cultural and situational factors affecting recruitment, retention, and instruction. From an individual instructor's perspective, however, the bias - - and it is the bias of this paper - - might appropriately be toward the psychological and methodological factors. Even these, of course, can only be suggested in a paper of this size, so abundant references are given for each topic treated.

It is no accident that speaking and listening are congenial activities for most ABE and ASE students while reading and writing are not. The difference in congeniality springs directly from the characteristics of the communication activities themselves. Five important differences are summarized in the following table, a somewhat different form of which is given by Olson and others (1980, p. 70). Kazemek's discussion of these issues is wonderfully insightful and concise (Hill, 1989).

Speaking/Listening	Writing/Reading
- familiar	- unfamiliar (See Skulicz, 1984, p. 6)
- spontaneous and immediate	- considered with delayed gratification

- fleeting
- relational and social
- characterized by emotion

- permanent
- personal and individual
- characterized by thought (A comprehensive discussion occurs in Hays, 1983, pp. 8-9, 31ff)

No wonder the learners are threatened by the prospect of writing instruction. One important result of the differences between speaking and listening on the one hand and reading and writing on the other is the certainty that ABE and ASE learners' self-esteem will be deeply engaged when the topic of instruction is composition, and one thing which is known for sure about many ABE and ASE learners is that their self-esteem is neither very positive nor very solid. A more nuanced discussion of ABE and ASE learners' self-esteem is contained in Beder and Valentine (1990, p. 79).

Writing Instruction and Self-Esteem

It is certainly true that many factors contribute to success and/or failure in ABE and ASE activities, but even if all other factors promoting success are in place, it is a virtual certainty

that ABE and ASE writers will succeed or fail in direct correlation to what is happening to their self-esteem in the context of the writing instruction. Brown's study of volunteer literacy tutors (1982, p. 33) indicates that tutors who are experienced and perceived as effective are aware of this correlation whether or not that awareness is shared by most professional adult educators. There are two kinds of responsible strategies for addressing the learners' self-esteem needs. One possibility is to be as gentle, subtle, and circumspect as possible. One might, for example, conduct all ABE and ASE writing instruction by means of personal tutoring, but such a strategy is not economical in terms of money, effort, or time. The other possibility is to confront the issue head-on and make building self-esteem an integral part of the writing instruction. The current discussion intends to be a comprehensive argument for choosing this second alternative.

Perhaps especially with adult learners, the requirement is for honest instruction. A more general discussion of this and associated issues appears in Conti and Fellenz (1983). Even if they are not able or willing quite to make the words, ABE and ASE learners already know that writing is different from speaking, that it is more difficult for them, and that it makes them

vulnerable (Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit, p.5). When those truths are said out loud, preferably during the first class session, a great sigh of relief can be heaved, and then the group can move forward into the actual writing instruction.

The first guideline for teaching writing to adults, then, is telling the truth about how hard and risky writing is. The second guideline is respecting the learner's integrity. Many ABE and ASE students have quite short-term goals, and these goals are very often coupled with grandiose dreams (Skulicz, p. 3). They deserve to know, therefore, whether the instruction they are about to receive is going to help them attain their goals and whether or not the instructor shares their dreams.

Respecting the learners' integrity means creating and articulating a very clear policy regarding confidentiality. At the whole-class level, that policy can be a reflection of the practice of the humanistic psychologies, which make a point of saying "what happens in this room stays in this room." At the level of individual pieces of writing, preserving confidentiality means that learners have the freedom of deciding whether and how their work will be shared. It is certainly possible, for instance, that some writing will not be available even to the instructor to read, much less to respond to and evaluate.

Gorrell (1987), for example, describes a process of structuring the writing journal in such a fashion that student confidentiality is built into the fabric of the assignment.

Establishing the sort of climate most likely to both further the writing instruction and safeguard and enhance the self-esteem of ABE and ASE learners means creating a community of learning, that is, a learning environment which is characterized by small-group, cooperative learning where individuals are responsible not only for their own learning but also for the learning of their colleagues. Schneider's anecdotal description of such a community (Hill, 1989, pp. 6-7) asserts that basic skill acquisition is most effectively and efficiently acquired in an environment of fully collaborative learning.

Indeed, there is substantial warrant in the adult education literature for implementing this sort of instructional design. For instance, Conti (1985, p. 221) says, "A significantly large portion of the adult education literature supports the collaborative mode as the most effective and appropriate style for teaching adults. . . . [The argument is] the curriculum should be learner-centered, that learning episodes should capitalize on the learner's experience, that adults are self-

directed, that the learner should participate in needs diagnosis, goals formation, and outcomes evaluation, that adults are problem-centered, and that the teacher should serve as a facilitator rather than a repository of facts."

Creating such an environment, however, runs directly counter to what is known about some ABE and ASE learners. According to some researchers (for example, Mezirow and others, 1975; Watson, 1980, p. 56), these learners are not interested in socializing in the context of their learning experiences. They tend to be self-absorbed and uninterested in relating with their classmates. Even such rabid proponents of individualized, student-directed learning as Hiemstra and Sisco admit that "some learners . . . will have considerable initial difficulty in a setting where individualization is stressed" (1990, p. 6). Hiemstra and Sisco even admit, " . . . individualizing . . . will often require you to weather some initial learner confusion, anxiety, or suspicion. . . . occasional hostility or uncooperativeness must be overcome. In other words an investment of time is required to build a 'community of learners' . . . " (p. 13).

Nevertheless, there are substantial advantages which accrue when the community of learning is insisted upon. Some advantages

are simply economic. If it is deemed economically infeasible to conduct writing instruction by means of one-on-one tutorials, it simply makes economic sense to have students teach each other. They will not, after all, all have precisely the same strengths nor precisely the same weaknesses. Shor (1987, pp. 108-109) suggests, for example, a process he calls "the dictation sequence" in which the class is divided into dyads. One student speaks a narrative slowly, and the other writes it down word for word thereby teaching the learners that writing "is nothing more than encoded speech."

Shor's dictation sequence suggests also other advantages which are associated with the whole-language approach to teaching language arts. Small groups are an environment very conducive to teaching more effective and efficient speaking and listening skills, and all the oral communication in the small groups can be grist for the writing mill. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening are somewhat different from each other, to be sure, but they are also related to each other. They are the four means of communicating verbally, and although there is not inevitable one-to-one transfer, fluency in one is capable of increasing fluency in each of the others. Shor's "voicing technique," for example, (1987, pp. 110-111) is a good demonstration of the power of the

whole language method as applied especially to basic education. Students, Shor says, read aloud what they have written, and "the grammar in your speech will automatically correct errors made by your writing hand." Kazemek (Hill, 1989) provides ten principles of holistic language education, rightly observing that whole-language is not an approach but a philosophy. For a more comprehensive but also more pedestrian discussion, See Rena Soifer's (and others) The Complete Theory-to-Practice Handbook of Adult Literacy, especially pp. ix-xi and 1-46.

A third set of advantages to creating a community of learning comes from beneficial changes which will occur in the affective domain. If class activity is conducted under the rubric of trust (which requires appropriate self-disclosure), learners will both be affirmed and have an educational experience which, perhaps for the first time, feels good.

As suggested in the preceding paragraph, trust is built by means of appropriate self-disclosure. It is the instructor's job to model vulnerability for the learners. These considerations do not mean that writing instruction give way to growth-group methodologies but rather that the instructor take some emotional chances with the learners. For example, it is possible to surrender a measure of responsibility for both learning content

and learning style without surrendering the responsibility which necessarily inheres in the instructor's expertise.

Since, however, ABE and ASE learners tend to communicate at quite low levels of abstraction (Hays, 1983, pp. 35-40), they will want some personal emotional contact with the instructor. How much of such contact and how it will be made are matters which necessarily rest with the subjectivity of the instructor.

Minimally, the instructor will be available to the learners. Ideally, the instructor will come to class early and stay until the last learner has left. Instructors will also provide learners with at least a phone number and hours when the instructor can be reached. Some learners will be drawn to this sort of teaching and desire significant one-on-one contact with the instructor out of class. As long as the instructor is both professionally ethical and aware that personal contact tends to dilute the building of community, such contact is to be welcomed if not encouraged.

Characteristics of the Writing Process

Simply addressing the self-esteem needs of ABE and ASE learners will not, of course, necessarily affect their writing ability at all. The requirement is to teach the writing process in ways that are informed by the connections between learning and self-esteem.

Fortunately, there are only a few interconnected concepts ABE and ASE writing students need to learn in order to become acceptably competent. First, they must learn that writing is more process than it is event (PaPAL Bulletin, 1988, p. 6; State University of New York, 1988, p. 7). Without becoming doctrinaire about naming the parts of the process, the writing instructor must introduce them to prewriting, writing itself, and editing.

For learners who doubt that they have anything worth writing about, brainstorming and clustering are perhaps the prewriting activities which should be engaged in first. Other learners, who already know they have a great lot to say, might begin with freewriting. Shor (1987, p. 107), however, advises freewriting for all students no matter what their level of ability because, "This spontaneous writing is an athletic exercise to develop

compositional fluidity. . . . Week by week, the amount of writing students complete . . . invariably increases. Their growing facility with words is ego-restorative." In the same chapter, Shor also provides a much abridged discussion of prewriting.

At these beginning stages of writing instruction, word processing offers some advantages in terms of ease of producing a substantial quantity of words, but it is also quite possible to teach the process with simply paper and pen. The important thing, for all learners, is developing the ability to get many words on paper (or screen). Whatever will accomplish this result are the strategies to be attempted, and it is quite possible to have small groups work on prewriting together. When they begin to disagree, they can be reminded that writing is a process for individuals and that the individual "disagreements" are likely to be precisely the point at which individual writers are beginning to do their own personal work.

Prewriting is traditionally conducted in terms of topic only, but adding the categories <u>purpose</u> and <u>audience</u> makes the process and product that result a great deal richer and of dependably higher quality. These learners will have much difficulty specifying their purpose and audience because they have not been accustomed to thinking of writing as real

communication. When they are pressed to do so, the writing which results will be either very utilitarian (such as notes to their children's teachers, complaints to merchants, and job-related material) or explorations of their own personal interiorities. All competent writing instructors will be able to handle the first set of real writings; those with suitable knowledge and values will, perhaps, focus upon the personal self-explorations.

The task of specifying topic, purpose, and audience will be very difficult for ABE and ASE learners. They are not used to thinking systematically in any categories, but the ladder of abstraction will present them with a special set of challenges. They will confuse it with lists of emotionally based free association (the sort of processing which most typically informs their communication) and timelines (the one rationally based system of connection with which they have some familiarity).

The instructor can therefore not wait until they have mastered the specifying process before soliciting "finished" pieces of writing from the learners. In the interests of addressing their self-esteem needs, these pieces must be evaluated not comprehensively but in terms of the two "meta-requirements" of all communication: passion and truth (Hays, 1983, pp. 196-197). The learners will be glad to discover that

the effectiveness of their writing is based upon passionately held convictions about what matters, for they do hold such convictions even if they are not capable of articulating them in very intellectually satisfying ways. Whole-class rational reflection on these convictional writings is quite effective in motivating these learners to return to the hard tasks of prewriting one more time.

As Perl's research indicates (New Mexico University, 1987, p. 5), less experienced writers are overwhelmed when trying to manage both mechanical and higher-level writing tasks at the same time. Therefore, with most ABE and ASE learners matters of grammar and spelling are best left to relatively late in the educational experience. This delay is appropriate for at least three reasons in addition to the one cited by Perls. First, it is widely known that there is little if any positive correlation between grammatical competence and writing effectiveness. Secondly, it is only after they have done writing which they are potentially proud of that they are likely to care to do what is necessary to make that writing communicate most effectively, and, thirdly, the sorts of grammatical problems they have will show up in their writing. It is more efficient to deal

with the problems they actually demonstrate rather than assuming that they will benefit from some artificially organized system of grammar instruction.

The Journal

The writing journal is a teaching and learning device which is ideally suited to ABE and ASE writing instruction. Because it is compact and portable and does not depend on electronic technology, the journal can follow the learners everywhere they go. Because they are so inexpensive, the materials are well within the range of all ABE and ASE learners, and because it is a personal and ordinary object, the journal is well fitted to promoting the causes of personal ownership and confidentiality.

The journal is informal and non-intimidating; therefore learners will be easily disposed to do in it the kind of doodling and dabbling that are characteristic of prewriting-as-play, and, of course, the journal is easily shared with the instructor and other writing colleagues. As Bean and Johnson (1980, p. 9) observe in their account of the Pittsburgh Adult Competency Program, writing journals are a way for learners to overcome

their shyness and even share some of the more distressing issues of their lives which have inhibited their academic progress. A great variety of ways to do journals are presented in Dialogue, a newsletter available from Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22nd Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20037. Since "dialogue journals" are widely used in even elementary schools, ABE and ASE educators will need to make significant modifications of the newsletter contents in order to demonstrate respect for adult learners.

Those wanting to test the limits of the journal-possibilities should see the work of Ira Progoff (1975). Based on the work of scholars such as Progoff, the journal has already been demonstrated to be an effective means of self-examination. The private and personal character of the journal (virtually all persons, for example, have experience with that cousin of the journal which goes by the name of diary) well suits the journal for writing activities which are self-referrential, self-directed and for the purpose of self-awareness, but, of course, there is no need to follow Progoff's methodology with any precision since, in a writing class, psychological considerations are not the higher priority.

Since ABE and ASE writing instruction is more a matter of process and practice than it is of new data to be acquired, the journal can even serve as a class-created text. Learners can discover together, and then record in their journals, the conceptual material the class decides is necessary for this group of persons to grow as writers. Instructors totally unfamiliar with the writing journal will find a solid introduction in "The Writing Wheel" (1987). The authors of this document have not conceived how fundamental the journal can be to writing instruction. Indeed, they tend to mistake journals as a substitute for grammar workbooks. Nevertheless, their strategies - - even to some extent their grammar activities - - are easily expanded and generalized.

What is being suggested is that the writing journal can serve as the primary if not exclusive means of ABE and ASE writing instruction. This suggestion has the great advantages of focussing the learners' attention on only the most immediate learning tasks and also providing the learners with a single compact repository of all the wisdom they are gaining. Of course, instructional designers who believe that a variety of stimuli is likely to result in higher quality learning are free to add whatever resources they desire, for no resource is one

that can not be utilized in conjunction with the journaling process.

Perhaps the most convincing reason to use the writing journal as the primary means of ABE and ASE writing instruction is derived from the close connection between condition of self-esteem and amount and degree of skill-acquisition. Learners who have had a decisive hand in discovering not only what they need to learn but also why and how they need to learn it are learners who have taken adult responsibility for themselves. The clear claiming of learning responsibility is not something which many ABE and ASE learners have much experience with, and it is quite likely that providing them such an experience will have positive implications with regard to their continuing learning for the rest of their lives.

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